

The Mail Coach Service

Origins and the first mail coach

When a public postal service was first introduced in 1635, letters were carried between 'posts' by mounted post-boys and delivered to the local postmaster. The postmaster would then take out the letters for his area and hand the rest to another post-boy to carry them on to the next 'post'. This was a slow process and the post-boys were an easy target for robbers, but the system remained unchanged for almost 150 years.

John Palmer, a theatre owner from Bath, had organised a rapid carriage service to transport actors and props between theatres and he believed that a similar scheme could improve the postal service. In 1782, Palmer sold his theatre interests, and went to London to lobby The Post Office. Despite resistance from senior Post Office staff, who believed the speed of the mail could not be improved, William Pitt, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, accepted the idea. An experimental mail coach journey, undertaken at Palmer's expense, started from Bristol on 2 August 1784, at 4pm. It reached London at 8am the next day, exactly on schedule. A journey that had taken up to 38 hours now took just 16.

Extension of the service

The success of the trial led Pitt to authorise other mail coach routes and by spring 1785, coaches from London served Norwich, Liverpool and Leeds. By the end of that year there were services to Dover, Portsmouth, Poole, Exeter, Gloucester, Worcester, Holyhead and Carlisle, and by 1786, the service had also reached Edinburgh. That same year, Palmer was made Surveyor and Comptroller General of the Post Office.

Method of operation

The mail coach, horses and the driver were all provided by contractors. Competition for the contracts was fierce because it meant status and a

regular income in addition to passenger fares. The first mail coaches were poorly built but an improved patented coach, designed by John Besant, was adopted by The Post Office in 1787. Besant, later in partnership with John Vidler of Millbank, enjoyed the monopoly of supplying the coaches. Every morning, when coaches reached London, they were taken to a constructor's works, usually Vidler's, to be cleaned and oiled. In the afternoon, they were returned to the coaching inns, where horses were hitched up for journeys to all parts of the country. Outside London, coaches also made journeys between the main post towns. The average speed of the coaches was usually 7-8 mph in summer and about 5 mph in winter, but with improvements to the quality of the roads, it had risen to 10 mph by the time Queen Victoria came to the throne.

Mail coach guards

The only Post Office employee aboard the mail coach was the guard. He was heavily armed, carrying two pistols and a blunderbuss. He wore an official uniform of a black hat with a gold band and a scarlet coat with blue lapels and gold braid. He also had a timepiece, regulated in London to keep pace with the differences in local time, and recorded the coach's arrival and departure times at each stage of the journey. The guard sounded a horn to warn other road users to keep out of the way and to signal to toll-keepers to let the coach through. As the coach travelled through towns or villages where it was not due to stop, the guard would throw out the bags of letters to the Letter Receiver or Postmaster. At the same time, the guard would snatch from him the outgoing bags of mail. One guard, Moses Nobbs, served for 55 years (1836-1891) on coaches and later on trains.

Mail coach livery

From the establishment of Besant's patent coach in 1787, the livery remained the same. The upper part

of the coach was painted black while the door and lower panels were maroon. The wheels were what is now known as Post Office red. The Royal Coat of Arms appeared on the doors along with the title 'Royal Mail' and the name of the town at either end of the coach's route. The stars of the four principal orders of knighthood – the Garter, the Bath, the Thistle, and St. Patrick – appeared on the upper panels of the body. The cipher of the reigning monarch was on the front boot, and the number of the coach on the back boot.

Travelling on the coaches

Initially, four passengers were carried inside the mail coach but later one more was allowed to sit outside next to the driver. The number of external passengers was increased to three with the introduction of a double seat behind the driver. No one was permitted to sit at the back near the guard or the mail box. The mail coach travelled faster than the stage coach but whereas the stage stopped for meals where convenient for its passengers, the mail coach stopped only where necessary for postal business. The journey could get quite rough in places and the passengers had to get out and walk if the coach was going up a steep hill in order to save straining the horses. The contractors organised fresh horses at stages along the route, usually every 10 miles.

An unusual event occurred in October 1816 when the Exeter mail coach, while on its way to London, drew into the Pheasant Inn on Salisbury Plain. The leading horses were attacked by a lioness which had escaped from a travelling menagerie. The lioness then turned her attentions towards a large dog which had proceeded to attack her, which she chased and killed. The lioness's owner eventually recovered her from underneath a nearby granary. The passengers had taken refuge inside the inn, bolting the door and stopping anyone else from entering.

Demise of the service

The development of the railways led to the end of the mail coaches, with railways first carrying mail on 11 November 1830, between Liverpool and Manchester. Other rail lines developed and by the early 1840s many London-based mail coaches were being withdrawn from service. The last regular

London based coach service was the London to Norwich, via Newmarket, which ended on 6 January 1846. Mail coaches survived however on services between some provincial towns until the 1850s. Many mail coach guards found continuing Post Office employment as mail guards on the trains.

Sources

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